

FOULOIS FIRSTS



While known for being the “father of U.S. military aviation” with his historic flight at Fort Sam Houston March 2, 1910, Benjamin D. Foulois was also the owner of many other aviation-related “firsts.”

1908 – First flight as a dirigible pilot

After seeing American inventor Thomas S. Baldwin demonstrate a dirigible at the St. Louis air meet in 1907, Brig. Gen. James Allen, Chief Signal Officer, discussed purchasing one for the Signal Corps. The Signal Corps had long urged the U.S. Army to buy a dirigible, and many European armies had them by the turn of the century.

During the summer of 1908, the Army tested a Baldwin non-rigid dirigible – and formally accepted it as Signal Corps Dirigible No. 1.

After Foulois, a first lieutenant, graduated from Signal Corps School at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., in July 1908, he was assigned to the Office of the Chief Signal Officer in Washington, D.C., and on Aug. 28, Lts. Frank Lahm, Thomas Selfridge and Foulois were taught to fly SC-1.

1909 – First observer on an aircraft cross-country

As one of the three officers in the Army to operate the first military airplane purchased by the Government from the Wright Brothers in 1909, he participated in the trials of the Wright Flyer.

During the trials, Foulois was on board in the observer's seat of the Wright Flyer with Orville Wright, and clocked the airplane's landmark 10-mile flight time from Fort Myer to Alexandria, Va., at a speed of 42.5 miles per hour that qualified that airplane for acceptance into the Army. The flight also broke three world records – speed, altitude and duration cross-country. The one-man Aeronautical Division of the Signal Corps was born.

In his memoirs, Foulois jokingly stated that he was chosen on the basis of intellectual and technical ability, but he realized later that it was his 5-foot-6-inch stature, 126-pound weight, and map-reading ability that qualified him for the flight.

1910 – First military man to teach himself to fly

After only 54 minutes of flight training with the Wright Brothers and no solo experience, Foulois left Fort Myers, Md., in 1909 and headed for Fort Sam Houston, Texas, as the United States' lone pilot with a team of enlisted men known as his “flying soldiers.”

He was instructed to teach himself how to keep flying; to use and take care of the United States' first airplane, designated “Signal Corps No. 1;” assess its military possibilities; and to take along plenty of spare parts.

He learned to fly it on his own, using instructions sent via letters from Orville and Wilbur Wright.



Photos by James Hare

Courtesy of George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester, NY

Lt. Benjamin Foulois looks at the map as Sgt. Stephen Idzorek, Phillip Parmalee and Maj. George Squier confer at the target range, March 17, 1911 at Leon Springs Military Reservation, Texas.

1911 – First to fly more than 100 miles non-stop

With Foulois plotting a course and Phillip Parmelee at the controls, the Wright Type B, on loan from Robert F. Collier, sets an official U.S. cross-country record from Laredo to Eagle Pass, Texas. It flew the 106 miles in two hours, 10 minutes on March 3. He and Parmelee flew along the Rio Grande River at an altitude of 1,200 feet from Laredo to Eagle Pass to search for enemy troops. They saw none during the flight.

While conducting preliminary flights at Laredo, James Hare, a photographer from Collier's magazine arrived and was taken aloft several times. Hare took a number of pictures of the terrain and established another first: photo reconnaissance and aerial map making.

1916 – First American to fly in combat

Pancho Villa's March 9, 1916, raid on Columbus, N.M., presented Foulois and the First Aero Squadron with a major opportunity. On March 19, he led his squadron to Casas Grandes, 125 miles south of the Mexican border.

Weather, terrain, inexperienced pilots, the lack of maps and communications combined with the shortcomings of the underpowered aircraft to pose unsolvable problems. Crashes and maintenance troubles steadily reduced their numbers until, by April 14, the First Aero Squadron was down to its last two aircraft.

Despite all their difficulties, Foulois and his men did a great deal of scouting and maintained an aerial mail route for the Mexican Punitive Expedition troops—commanded by Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing.

Foulois' candid and comprehensive report on the operations, plus the support of Pershing and

Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, led to the first substantial U.S. aviation appropriation—\$13,281,666 approved by Congress on Aug. 29, 1916.

The Mexican Punitive Expedition also brought Foulois into contact with William “Billy” Mitchell, who, up to that point, had never flown in an airplane. Mitchell and Foulois clashed over who was to blame for the squadron's lackluster performance in Mexico, and the two remained bitter rivals for the rest of their careers.

1918 – First Chief of Air Service, American Expeditionary Force, 1st Army

General Pershing personally requested Foulois for this job, believing Foulois could end the chaos within the fledgling Air Service in France.

Instead, it produced more friction and confusion. The air officers already in France were, for the most part, Regular Army and rated aviators, and resented having Foulois' staff imposed on them. Foulois believed his staff brought logistical and administrative skills that were essential to operational success, but others saw things differently.

Mitchell, now Air Service Commander for the Zone of Advance, was Foulois' bitterest critic. Mitchell referred to the new arrivals as “carpetbaggers,” charging that “a more incompetent lot of air warriors have never arrived in the zone of active military operations since the war began.” Pershing, the AEF Commander in Chief, called his new air staff “a lot of good men running around in circles.”

1931 – First Chief of the Air Corps to be a military aviator

After a series of important assignments in the 1920s, Foulois reported to the Office of the Chief of Air Corps in 1930 and earned the Mackay Trophy in 1931 for leading the Air Corps' annual exercises. On Dec. 19, he became chief of the Air Corps, the first military aviator to do so.

His vision and persistence laid the foundation for moving the Air Corps from a supporting branch of the Army toward full status as an independent service.



Collier aircraft with Lt. Benjamin Foulois and Phillip Parmalee landing at Leon Springs target range, March 17, 1911.